



# YOUNG WOMEN LEADING CHANGE: LESSONS FROM THE YOUTHPower LEARNING PRIZE GRANTEES

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# Young Women Leading Change: Lessons from the YouthPower Learning Prize Grantees

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USAID's YouthPower Learning generates and disseminates knowledge about the implementation and impact of positive youth development (PYD) and cross-sectoral approaches in international youth development. We are leading research, evaluations, and events designed to build the evidence base and inform the global community about how to transition young people successfully into productive, healthy adults. PYD is defined by USAID as:

Positive Youth Development (PYD) engages youth along with their families, communities, and/or governments so that youth are empowered to reach their full potential. PYD approaches build skills, assets, and competencies; foster healthy relationships; strengthen the environment; and transform systems.

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The US Agency for International Development (USAID) sought to explore locally driven solutions to economically empowering young women with the Young Women Transform Prize (Prize). Funded through YouthPower Learning, Prize grants provided to seven youth organizations afforded them the opportunity to increase girls' and young women's access to training to improve their chances of economic independence. The grantees, primarily youth-led organizations, helped girls and young women to start or improve small businesses; learn coding and other computer skills; start savings groups and borrow start-up funding; and, in one case, increase outreach to thousands with online courses, webinars, and social media.

This report summarizes the learning from the grantees. With a deep understanding of their communities, the grantees facilitated economic empowerment by helping girls and young women access physical and financial assets, grow their knowledge, self-awareness, aspirations and leadership skills through training and practice, and enhance a supportive enabling environment through systems change. The Prize grants were a range in value from US\$15,000 to US\$35,000. Most of the grantees were organizations founded and led by youth from the community where they work. All grants were implemented over a 12-month period, from November 2018 through October 2019. Their initiatives directly impacted more than 3,000 girls and young women between the ages of 15-29

There is a great opportunity to learn from the grantees' experience and build upon the knowledge gained from this activity. The lessons learned and recommendations developed based on Prize grantees' experience using a positive youth development (PYD) framework include:

- Facilitating young women's economic empowerment requires more girls completing secondary and higher education; girls enrolling in programs dominated by men such as those in science, technology, engineering and math (STEM); increasing financial literacy of girls and young women; cultural and systems changes that create an enabling environment that reduces sexual harassment and gender-based violence, and equal access to professional networks and financial services.
- Financial literacy training should be a key component of all youth workforce development programs. At the same time, programs should encourage expansion of financial products that meet the needs of girls and young women.
- To address the underlying factors that affect labor market demand and generate economic growth, youth workforce development programs should be designed as part of broader donor and government strategies. Workforce development programs must also avoid unreasonably raising youth and community expectations regarding their expected impact.
- Local organizations, like the Prize winners, who have experience with adapting PYD to the needs of girls, young women, and other sub-sets of youth who are marginalized are important members of the development community. PYD programs should address the effects of gender inequality and marginalization by supporting youth choice and agency using locally appropriate mechanisms and facilitating positive, growth mindsets.
- Choice and decision-making ability are keys to young women's economic empowerment and directly relate to control over decisions regarding assets, income, and spending. Choice and personal agency are often impeded by gender inequality, gender-based violence, and other

physical and psychological sources of harm, and cultural-related marginalization of girls and young women, such as those related to unwed teenage mothers and early marriage.

- Youth programs, especially those providing grants to local youth-led organizations, should assess potential grantee processes and support capacity strengthening in monitoring and evaluation. Prize grantees appreciated the opportunity this grant offered; however, most grantees were not able to comprehensively collect quality evaluation data on PYD indicators without significant additional support.
- Connecting with local organizations that have existing networks and knowledge is important so they can magnify program impact and increase scale through strategic, coordinated action with partners and networks. Prize grantees were able to leverage partnerships with public institutions and community coalitions to create systems change.
- Knowledge management and sharing lessons learned is necessary for strengthening the performance of youth organizations and the broader youth development sector. Youth programs should incentivize local organizations to document and share their experience and knowledge.
- When working with local youth-led organizations, be creative, flexible and deliberate in designing interventions to address the digital gender gap in education and workforce development programming. Monitor for unexpected challenges that come with introducing technologies and technology training programs to a community. Be prepared to adapt the application to different contexts as necessary.

## INTRODUCTION

In funding the Young Women Transform Prize, USAID invested in locally driven solutions to young women's economic challenges by funding young women-led organizations that are leading change in their communities. The Prize, which was managed through the USAID-funded [YouthPower Learning project](#), was a grant competition that ultimately resulted in seven awards to youth-led and youth-serving organizations working in Botswana, Colombia, Kenya, Nepal, Peru, South Africa, Tanzania, and Uganda. With additional funding provided by private sector partners the Volvo Group and Standard Chartered Bank, the Prize awardees invested in their own initiatives to advance young women's economic opportunities in their communities.

The purpose of this learning synthesis is to capture some of the most relevant and interesting lessons from the Prize grantees and their initiatives. The synthesis summarizes a review of project documents including grant applications, deliverables, final reports, results indicators, emails, and interviews with organization representatives. The report provides background on the grantees followed by lessons learned by themes critical to young women's economic empowerment:

- Access to physical and financial assets
- Growing personal assets and agency
- Creating an enabling environment through systems change
- Facilitating young women's leadership
- Addressing the digital gender gap

## BACKGROUND: ABOUT THE PRIZE GRANTEES

The Prize grants were small, ranging in value from US\$15,000 to US\$35,000, but powerful. Most of the grantees were organizations founded and led by youth from the community where they work. All grants were implemented over a 12-month period, from November 2018 through October 2019. Their initiatives directly impacted more than 3,000 girls and young women between the ages of 15-29 by providing various types of support and training including social and leadership skills training (Table I). Together, they engaged more than 136 girls and young women in the design and/or implementation of the program. In addition, they created opportunities for more than 830 girls and young women to make contributions to their community through civic engagement, advocacy, or volunteerism.

Table 1. Number of youth trained in social or leadership skills through US Government-assisted programs.<sup>1</sup>

	Number of Female Youth Participants, by age				Total	% Urban of Total	% Rural of Total
	10-14	15-19	20-24	20-29			
Disabled Women's Empowerment Centre	0	6	10	10	26	50%	50%
Dream Factory Foundation	0	2	68	0	70	100%	-
Kibera Community Empowerment Centre	0	30	55	21	106	100%	-
Safeplan Uganda	0	3	15	8	26	-	100%
The Biz Nation	0	101	908	1,139	2,148	9%	91%
Visionaria Network	32	720	0	0	752	32%	68%
<b>TOTALS</b>	<b>32</b> (1%)	<b>862</b> (27%)	<b>1,056</b> (34%)	<b>1,178</b> (38%)	<b>3,128</b>		

The Prize was a valuable opportunity for USAID and its partners to learn from young women who are on the frontlines of Positive Youth Development (PYD) programming. There were two categories of Prize grantees, both of which focused on collecting and disseminating learning about young women's economic opportunities and empowerment.

The first Prize category was the *Creation Prize*, which supported activities that have the potential to broaden young women's access to and choice over employment and economic security. There were three successful creation prizes:



**Disabled Women's Empowerment Centre** (DWEC) is a young woman-founded and led organization in *Nepal* that works to empower women with disabilities through advocacy and vocational, leadership, and entrepreneurial training. DWEC used the Prize grant to increase disabled women's access to a training center by constructing a suitable ramp, footpath, and toilets supporting multiple types of disabilities. The grant directly impacted 26 young women with disabilities between 15 and 29 years.

<sup>1</sup> Asante Africa Foundation did not report on this indicator as its grant funded an evaluation study.



[Dream Factory Foundation](#) (Dream Factory) is a young woman-founded organization operating in urban areas of *South Africa* and *Botswana*. The Prize grant funded a job readiness academy for 95 out of school youth focused on tech skills, leadership, and empowerment. Of those youth, 70 were women between the ages of 18 and 25. Training was followed by internship placement for youth to gain work experience.



[The Visionaria Network](#) (Visionaria) partners with schools in rural *Peru* to implement civic and personal development courses that help Quechua-speaking minority youth to build positive identities and find job opportunities. The Prize helped them conduct job market surveys and expand their courses from one to two provinces, reaching over 750 girls and young women between the ages of 10 and 19.

The *Recognition Prizes* sought to recognize and share learning about innovative strategies that have improved young women's economic opportunities. There were four successful Recognition Prize winners.



[Asante Africa Foundation](#) runs girl-led after-school clubs that connect adolescent girls with leadership, entrepreneurship and civic engagement opportunities. The Prize grant funded a system-wide programmatic evaluation that included surveys and focus groups with past alumni, current students, and teachers in *Kenya* and *Tanzania*.





[The Biz Nation](#) is a young women-owned social enterprise in *Colombia* that hosts online courses and entrepreneurship programs for young women. The Prize grant funded the creation of a free webinar series, which reached over 2,000 young women between the ages of 15 and 29 (as well as more than 250 young men), social media campaign and in-person events to reach educators and philanthropists working on young women's empowerment.



The [Kibera Community Empowerment Organization \(KCEO\)](#) is a social enterprise in the *Kenya* Kibera slum that helps young people, particularly young mothers with disabilities, build marketable skills and start their own businesses. The Prize grant funded a multi-sectoral, community campaign to change discriminatory practices and stigmas against people living with disabilities.



[Safeplan Uganda](#) is a young woman-founded and -led organization that works to create income opportunities for illiterate and landless men and women in an economy where the main income opportunity is in sugarcane, which requires land. Safeplan used the Prize award to expand the Budongo Women Bee Enterprises (BUWOBE) and upgrade the products the group enterprise sells.

## WHAT WE LEARNED: LESSONS FROM THE PRIZE GRANTS

The Young Women Transform Prize initiatives revealed several insightful lessons about how to increase girls' and young women's economic opportunities, particularly with regards to increasing access to physical and financial assets, growing personal assets, expanding choice and agency, facilitating a supportive enabling environment through systems change and young women's leadership, and addressing the digital gender gap.

### I. Accessing physical and financial assets

Recent research into what works for women's economic empowerment has highlighted the practice of "bundled services," which are a package of services that includes secure and private savings, comparatively large physical or financial assets, training and technical assistance, and stipends that cover the cost of transportation, childcare, or time spent in job training.<sup>2</sup> Although this can be costly upfront, it is proven to be cost-effective and impactful for very poor women. Facilitating young women's access to private savings is also proven to be an effective enabler of economic empowerment. Prize grantees emphasize the importance of physical and financial assets for women's economic opportunities. Here is what they learned.

#### *1.1 Social enterprises can be a source of start-up capital for young women's business ventures.*

As a social enterprise, Kibera Community Empowerment Organization (KCEO) earns a profit from making and selling shoes, called K-shoes, which they make from recycled materials collected in the Kibera slum of Nairobi where KCEO is based. They reinvest the profits from shoe sales into their programs. Young mothers with disabilities who want to start their own businesses can use these funds for start-up capital ranging from \$100-500 USD. This is far more than what young women can typically accrue from participating in savings groups, where global data from over 200,000 savings and loans groups shows that the average savings and assets per member is \$21.76 and \$30.33 USD respectively.<sup>3</sup>

*"I started my own project of a vegetable garden, and my skills came from attending the advancing levels of [Asante's program] ... I only needed Tsh. 5,000 as the start-up cost to buy different seeds. This came from my savings. The profit from my garden helped me pay Tsh. 500,000 fees for my IT certificates."*

- Young woman from an Asante girl-led club

#### *1.2 A culture of savings and investment provides a means for school-aged girls to accumulate financial assets.*

Asante Africa Foundation's girl-led clubs encouraged all participants to establish personal or group-based savings, which was one of the more successful parts of their program. Asante's system-wide program evaluation, which was funded by the Prize grant, found that girls in rural areas of Kenya and Tanzania are not only keeping par with boys in establishing and running businesses, but in some cases surpassing

<sup>2</sup> Mayra Buvinic, Rebecca Furst-Nichols, and Emily Courey Prior, "Roadmap for Action: Promoting Women's Economic Empowerment" (UN Foundation and ExxonMobile Foundation, 2012); Mayra Buvinic and Megan O'Donnell, "Revisiting What Works: Women, Economic Empowerment and Smart Design" (Center for Global Development, UN Foundation, November 2016).

<sup>3</sup> Roy Mersland et al., "What Are Savings Groups? A Description of Savings Groups Based on Information in the SAVIX Database," May 2019.

them. They found that girls are financing their own businesses at rates higher than boys but are also realizing profit and reporting plans for reinvesting or expanding their businesses at rates higher than boys.

However, Asante also learned that gender norms that are prevalent in students' homes continue to affect girls' access to financial assets. Their evaluation found that boys are more likely than girls to receive financial investments in their businesses from family. Their evaluation also found that, overall, other than savings and investments from family members; there are no other financing options for girls and young women entrepreneurs.<sup>4</sup>

### *1.3 Promoting enterprises that are market-driven and accessible for rural women can help women access land and overcome a gender resource gap.*

In agricultural economies like rural Uganda, where the Prize grantee, Safeplan Uganda operates, land is essential.<sup>5</sup> Safeplan identified beekeeping as a sector that could work around the fact that women are less likely to access or own land than men. They partnered with sustainable forestry efforts, getting approval to set up apiaries inside protected forest. Safeplan Uganda mobilized the Budongo Women Bee Enterprises (BUWOBE) and facilitated members' access to the equipment and apiaries for beekeeping. To complement their efforts, the Prize grant funded technical training and operational support to young women members of the enterprise. Safeplan also used Prize funds to help the young women set up a savings group. Despite these promising practices, Annet Birungi, the founding director of Safeplan, emphasizes that capital remains a major barrier for women in vocational programs: *"They need start-up capital. They need resources...they are very poor."*

## 2. Growing personal assets and agency

*"Empowerment starts within."*

Lusanda Magwape, age 33, Founder of Dream Factory Foundation in South Africa

Personal assets such as recognizing emotions, self-control, higher order thinking skills, interpersonal skills, and formal and non-formal education and training, are key to young women's economic empowerment and directly relate to control over decisions regarding assets like those described above. Prize grantees not only provided young people with technical skills training and hands-on experience, they worked with them to build their emotional awareness, self-control and interpersonal skills, thereby changing their mindset.

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<sup>4</sup> Asante Africa Foundation, "Transforming Vulnerable Girls to Entrepreneurial Women Through Leadership, Livelihood and Entrepreneurship Skills," 2019.

<sup>5</sup> Landesa, "Fact Sheet: Landesa Center for Women's Land Rights," 2016, [https://www.landesa.org/wp-content/uploads/LCWLR\\_FactSheet\\_2016.pdf](https://www.landesa.org/wp-content/uploads/LCWLR_FactSheet_2016.pdf).

The Prize grantees emphasized the importance of helping young women (and in some cases, young men) develop a mindset through which they see themselves as having value, rights, and being worthy of a fulfilling future. They used participatory and reflective workshops or training courses to help young people see themselves and their futures in a new way (see Table 2). For example:

*“The most interesting part for me is that I get to shape my leadership and social skills. My confidence has been built through knowing who I am and what I want.”*

- Female participant in Asante’s programs in Narok, Kenya

*“Before [the Visionaria in Schools program], I didn’t think I was good at many things. I didn’t notice who I was and what good things I have. Visionaria taught us that even if you have bad qualities, it’s not an option to beat yourself up. It was incredibly powerful to reflect about the things that were happening in our lives.”*

- Epifania, a Quechua-speaking Visionaria alumna and program advisor

*“The change of mindset [of the young women with disabilities who participated in our program] ... and their self-esteem has really gone up. They’ve become different people than who they were when they started the program.”*

- Rhoda Ayieko, the 25-year-old founder and executive director of KCEO

## *2.1 Self-reflection and interaction with peers in supportive environments builds emotional strength, self-control, interpersonal skills and facilitates a positive mindset.*

Three Prize grantees—Asante, Disabled Women's Empowerment Centre (DWEC), and KCEO—use human rights-based training to foster emotional strength and positive mindsets among youth participants. Visionaria uses agency-based empowerment to build self-confidence, self-esteem, and sense of self-worth. The Biz Nation uses a psychological communications approach to change social conditioning related to gender inequality. Although their core business are virtual webinars and trainings, they learned the process of changing mindsets requires in-person sessions and events to keep participants motivated and engaged. All grantees work with young people to do visioning and goal setting to help youth create powerful visions for their futures.

These workshops were not standalone trainings. All grantees combined them with complementary activities such as mentorship, exposure to role models, and a way to practice their newfound confidence and sense of accomplishment. For example, Visionaria worked with students to create portfolios highlighting their skills, experience, and qualities that make them unique, including their values and vision for the future. Traditional resumes and CVs are not very relevant to regional employers seeking young people for entry-level positions, so the portfolios were a novel resource to motivate and help young people present themselves to potential employers. The process of creating portfolios helped students think through their goals and skills while also learning how to communicate these distinguishing characteristics to others. Over 300 students created portfolios in 2018, and an additional 900 students created them in 2019.

*Table 2. Prize grantees’ training approach for building positive mindsets*

Training approach for building positive mindsets	Organization
Human rights-based training	Asante, DWEC, KCEO
Agency-based empowerment	Visionaria

Training approach for building positive mindsets	Organization
Healing and self-work with a social worker	Dream Factory Foundation
Psychology, communication, and personal development	The Biz Nation
Visioning and goal setting	All grantees

While the grantees were able to report on the number of youth trained; number of youth actively engaged in program decision-making; and number of youth provided with opportunities for community contributions, they did not have the capacity to measure more complicated indicators related to higher order thinking skills and positive identity.

## 2.2 Grantee Programs supported skill building.

Most of the Prize grantees focused on providing skills and information while also facilitating spaces for young people to practice their skills. The type of skills provided depended on the circumstances of the young people targeted by the program and the economic context in which they operated. All of them offered trainings and programs to equip participants with entrepreneurial skills (see Table 3). The organizations operating in markets where there are job opportunities for young people included training to prepare them for employment, such as resume development and professional etiquette courses. The Visionaria Network also used Prize funds for market surveys to learn what job skills local businesses need. Most organizations also provided either digital technology training (e.g., computer skills or coding) or another form of vocational training.

Table 3. Prize grantees' skills training

	Asante Africa Foundation	DWEC	Dream Factory Foundation	KCEO	Safeplan Uganda	Biz Nation	Visionaria Network
Entrepreneurial skills	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Job readiness	X		X			X	X
Digital and computer skills	X		X	X		X	
Non-digital vocational skills		X		X	X		
Financial literacy	X		X	X	X	X	

## 2.3 Opportunities for work experience through internships or on-the-job training are challenging to facilitate, because of limited opportunities and few that offer pay or travel stipends.

While youth developed their technical skills, only some were able to practice those skills on the job. For example, Dream Factory Foundation helped 24 of its 95 students find jobs; 63 students were invited for interviews. One of the challenges they faced in placing students was that employers rarely provided stipends, especially for young people who had not completed their secondary schooling. Since many of the jobs were in areas far from where students lived, the lack of a stipend was a significant barrier.

Similarly, the Asante Africa Foundation’s program evaluation found that alumna struggled to find internships: Out of 54 percent of alumna from Tanzania and 58 percent from Kenya that reported applying for internships, only 23 percent and 16 percent respectively reported successful placement. As Asante noted in their evaluation, the difference between demand for internships and availability is huge.<sup>6</sup>

#### *2.4 Youth need mentors and role models whose experiences open their minds to a new range of life opportunities and whose stories mirror their own life experiences.*

It is important that exposure serves as both mirrors and windows.<sup>7</sup> Mirrors refer to exposure to the life stories and pathways individuals with whom young people can relate in terms of identity and experience. For example, Dream Factory Foundation insured that many of their guest lecturers were Black women so that their students could see themselves in the successful person speaking to them. Windows are opportunities to look into the lives and pathways of people who are different than them. Both are important.

Many Prize recipients used mentorship days, peer-coaches, and guest lecturers to expose young women to a range of life and work possibilities without which youth participants remain limited in their vision of the future. Both KCEO and Safeplan offered mentorship days where young leaders and successful entrepreneurs shared their stories and advice about entrepreneurship. In Asante’s youth clubs, as young women moved through the program, they took on leadership roles to facilitate courses for and become mentors to younger girls. The young women of DWEC acted as peer mentors to each other during their training sessions where they discussed the challenges they face as disabled women and shared tips and success stories.

#### *2.5 Be aware of and adapt programs to multiple and compounding marginalizing circumstances that inhibit girls and young women’s choice and agency.*

Mindsets can be particularly constraining for girls and young women from marginalizing circumstances. The longstanding research on agency and oppression shows that marginalized groups internalize the norms that underlie their marginalization.<sup>8</sup> This is mirrored by the approaches taken by the Prize grantees, which associated young women’s suppressed mindsets with the discrimination and marginalization they experienced not only because of their gender identity, but also because of other marginalizing and traumatic circumstances like disability, displacement, migration, being of indigenous descent, and suffering from trauma and mood disorders.

- The interplay of gender and disability were at the crux of KCEO’s work in Kenya and DWEC’s work in Nepal. KCEO brought together community stakeholders to break down barriers that girls and young women with disabilities face in accessing jobs, bank loans, and health services. DWEC used their Prize grant to renovate a women’s training center to be physically accessible to women (including young women) with disabilities.

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<sup>6</sup> Asante Africa Foundation, “Transforming Vulnerable Girls to Entrepreneurial Women Through Leadership, Livelihood and Entrepreneurship Skills,” 2019.

<sup>7</sup> Emily Style, “National SEED Project - Curriculum As Window and Mirror,” in *Listening for All Voices* (Summit, NJ: Oak Knoll School monograph, 1988), <https://nationalseedproject.org/Key-SEED-Texts/curriculum-as-window-and-mirror>.

<sup>8</sup> David, *Internalized Oppression*; Cassar and Katz, “Gender, Behavior, and Women’s Economic Empowerment”; Boudet et al., “On Norms and Agency: Conversations about Gender Equality with Women and Men in 20 Countries”; Kabeer, “Resources, Agency, Achievements: Reflections on the Measurement of Women’s Empowerment.”

- The Biz Nation in Colombia and Safeplan Uganda worked with young women who had experienced armed conflict and resultant displacement. Both organizations described how these young women need supportive environments to build a positive mindset about themselves because they lacked the community support systems that they had prior to being displaced.
- The Visionaria Network worked with youth who were part of the Quechua-speaking minority of Peru, a group whose mere identity as indigenous people has become associated with a racial slur. As such, they needed the positive sense of self-worth built through youth clubs.
- The Asante Foundation tried to be inclusive of young women from pastoralist communities whom they were more likely to reach when they facilitated programs in boarding schools, without which young girls were always moving with their community instead of staying in school.

### 3. Creating an enabling environment through systems change

There are many aspects of young people’s environment that present barriers to PYD. For young women, the barriers are exacerbated by gender inequality and social norms.

#### *3.1 Youth-led and youth-serving organizations can support systems change through successful partnerships with schools.*

The Visionaria for Schools (VfS) program is designed to complement and accelerate the impact of Peru’s new national curriculum that requires integrating vital themes like gender equality, youth engagement, and building positive personal and cultural identities. The VfS team trains and supports secondary school teachers who use the one-year Visionaria curriculum during their regular “Personal and Civic Development” class with 9th graders. With Prize funding, VfS trained civics teachers from 13 schools. Scaling up VfS training requires staff, training of trainers, and funding to reach civics teachers.

Asante’s model primarily works through after-school clubs, along with supplementary conferences and workshops. “*The current education system is not preparing young people for the world of work,*” said Patriciah Muigai, Kenya Program Manager. “*Our program works in partnership with schools and local governments to address that gap in the education system.*” Like VfS, Asante trains teachers who then facilitate clubs, classes, and programs. As part of this training, the organizations expose teachers to concepts related to PYD, including an awareness of gender norms and how they influence and create barriers for women and men. These school partnerships help to complement school curricula with job readiness skills, entrepreneurial opportunities, and socio-economic support. Since 2010, Asante has worked with more than 300,000 teenaged youth in schools.

*“We are preparing young people for the world of work. The school environment is the best place to do this intervention because we are going beyond the normal school subjects like physics and math to help them understand themselves, their strengths, their weaknesses.”*

— Patriciah Muigai, Kenya Program Manager, Asante Africa Foundation

### *3.2 Cross-sectoral, community coalitions can catalyze changes in social norms and policies that discriminate against marginalized groups.*

Institutional discrimination and stigma against young women are even greater for those with disabilities, who often cannot go to events or meetings because they are inaccessible to people in wheelchairs, or because there are no sign language interpreters or braille. Kibera Community Empowerment Organization showed us an example of how cross-sectoral coalitions of government and financial institutions, businesses, civil society, and other stakeholders can work together to change discriminatory policies and practices that are barriers to young women's economic opportunities. By successfully activating local institutions, KCEO increased their impact and exemplified a way to take their program to scale throughout Kenya. The grantee brought together representatives from the Chief's office, daycare centers, bank branches, and other disability advocates to create a Community Advisory Board. They also partnered with a radio station and created a radio show featuring women disability activists. They hosted community events—called Chief Baraza—about disability rights. As a result, they began to see tangible changes in how people with disabilities are treated in the community. Specifically:

- Three bank branches have created a policy prohibiting discrimination against people with disabilities in access to loans.
- Six early childcare education centers have begun admitting children with disabilities.
- The local government ward opened procurement to businesses owned by women with disabilities. One young-woman-owned business has secured a contract to provide tea and snacks to the office of the local Chief.

Disabled Women's Empowerment Centre, on the other hand, learned that it needs to better sensitize key stakeholders. The contractors and construction workers did not know about accessible design and constructed a useless footpath following their own design rather than following the one they were given by DWEC. The footpath was torn up and redone, causing unnecessary delays and frustration. “*The main lesson we have learned is that there should be a sensitization program for construction workers and other stakeholders about disability issues when undertaking a project like this,*” said Anjana KC, DWEC Executive Director.

### *3.3 There is a need to address the pervasiveness of gender- and disability-based violence at a systemic level.*

Five Prize grantees referenced gender-based violence including early marriage, female genital mutilation, sexual harassment, and intimate partner abuse as a prevalent barrier to young women's ability to safely enter and stay in the workforce. Asante's evaluation stated that young women from Tanzania cited “sexual favors” as one of the challenges in job interviews and securing a job. Adolescent girls in Asante's program experience female genital mutilation and early marriage. Many of the young women who joined Safeplan's programs were forced into marriages and suffer violence and abuse from their spouses or partners.

As KCEO highlighted in their book, *Disrupting Disability*, which was produced with Prize funding, experiences of gender-based violence are compounded for women with disabilities because of the stigma and structural inequalities associated with having a disability. In the workplace, they face persistent harassment because of their disability. As *Disrupting Disability* illustrates, “many successful workers with disabilities drop their work performance or ultimately stop going to work when faced



with persistent intimidation, harassment and even feelings of unwantedness from their colleagues without a disability.”<sup>9</sup>

Although few grantees directly addressed this by tackling the systems that perpetuate and enable gender- and disability-based violence, some worked to mitigate the impacts through their training curricula. For example, Asante Africa Foundation’s youth club curriculum addresses forced early marriage and female genital mutilation. Dream Factory Foundation provides an intensive, two-day sexual harassment training as part of its job readiness program. The Biz Nation addressed sexual harassment in its free women’s economic empowerment webinar, which was funded by the Prize.

#### 4. Facilitating young women’s leadership

Young women are often excluded from leadership opportunities because of their gender and their young age. Women with disabilities are even less likely to have leadership opportunities. As Anjana KC, DWEC Executive Director pointed out, even the disability advocacy space is dominated by men. In contrast, the Prize directly funded young women-led organizations and initiatives, providing opportunities for worthwhile lessons about how to amplify young women’s leadership in development.

##### *4.1 Groups of youth in which girls make up most of the founding leadership and membership are more likely to foster girls’ leadership skills and opportunities.*

Asante Africa Foundation has a quota for girls’ leadership in clubs. In the first year of the club, clubs are required to be led by two-thirds girls. When girls make up most of the founding club officers and members, they are more likely to maintain greater ownership and gain assertiveness and confidence interacting with school officials. Alternatively, when boys are most of the founding leadership, girls are often reticent to take on leadership roles, and in the absence of the majority female quota, girls slowly leave their leadership roles. The evaluation funded by the Prize grant found both male and female club participants reported their attitudes towards women in school-level leadership positions changed as a result of the program. Their evaluation concluded that “having more women in visible leadership roles can help shift more positive attitudes towards them being in those roles.”<sup>10</sup>

##### *4.2 Youth-led organizations are effective implementers of youth programs but need support in developing operational systems to comply with donor and INGO standards.*

*“We are part of the community. We are in their shoes. We know what they need and what they want.”*

— Annet Birungi, Executive Director of Safeplan Uganda

There is immeasurable value in having young women-led organizations leading initiatives to promote the empowerment of others like them in the community. Most of the Prize grantee organizations were founded and are led by young women in their twenties or early thirties who are from the communities they serve. Their ability to understand and address the nuanced barriers facing young people in their

<sup>9</sup> Kibera Community Empowerment Organization, *Disrupting Disability: Building an Inclusive Society* (Bungoma County, Kenya, 2020).

<sup>10</sup> Asante Africa Foundation, “Transforming Vulnerable Girls to Entrepreneurial Women Through Leadership, Livelihood and Entrepreneurship Skills,” 2019, p. 47.

programs was particularly valuable to the program. As Annet Birungi explained, “*We are part of the community. We are in their shoes. We know what they need and what they want.*”

However, youth-led organizations have less experience with the donor ecosystem and need support, such as capacity strengthening, in developing the operational systems expected by grant making institutions. Several of the Prize grantees see donors and international NGOs as important partners for helping them build out their operational systems so that they can expand and grow. “*Youth-led organizations have very good ideas and visions,*” said Rhoda Ayieko, the 25-year-old founder and executive director of KCEO, “*but the organization systems—financial, procurement, human resources—are where we need help,*” referring to financial, procurement, HR, and other operational systems.

#### ***4.3 Give opportunities to youth and youth-led organizations to produce knowledge, learning, and resources that are relevant to the broader development sector.***

The Prize shed light on youth expertise as an important yet often unacknowledged form of youth leadership. For example, several of the Prize grantees created resources, handbooks, and methodologies to guide their work. Their thought leadership is applicable to their communities and other contexts. Two examples of products Prize grantees produced are:

**The Honey Book: A beekeeping handbook for rural women, Safeplan Uganda:** designed and produced for the women of Budongo Women Bee Enterprises, this book contains practical examples and experiences on how to start a beekeeping enterprise with minimal financial investment.

**Disrupting Disability, KCEO:** This book challenges harmful stereotypes about people with disabilities in infrastructure, labor, leadership, and sexual and reproductive health sectors. Using intersectional analysis of how gender intersects with disability, poverty, and other marginalizing identities, the book shares statistics and stories about the indignities faced by young women and men with disabilities.

*“...when the discussion on fair employment shifts from **inclusive** disability employment towards **who is the most affected** by unfair employment practices targeting people with disabilities, then we'll be able to achieve tangible results towards inclusive employment since we will be able to improve where the feet pains most. [address the pain of the people who feel it the most.]”*

—Excerpt from the book *Disrupting Disability*. Bold text added for emphasis.

## **5. Addressing the digital gender gap**

Young people in impoverished, under-resourced, and rural communities often lack access to information, opportunities, skills, and resources. Their limited access is exacerbated by gender. Globally, women are less likely to have access to the internet and digital technology.<sup>11</sup> According to global data from the International Telecommunications Union, the proportion of women using the Internet is 12% lower than the proportion of men.<sup>12</sup> In addition, the gender gap has actually increased in Africa since

<sup>11</sup> International Telecommunications Union, “ICT Facts and Figures,” 2017, <https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Documents/facts/ICTFactsFigures2017.pdf>.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

2013, where the proportion of women using the Internet is 25% lower than the proportion of men.<sup>13</sup> In light of this digital gender gap, it is notable that three of the Prize organizations worked to address the barriers young people from marginalized backgrounds face in accessing, using, and building skills in digital technologies.

### *5.1 Technology can be an incentive for girls' (and teachers') participation in skill-building programs.*

Asante Africa Foundation supplies Digital Smart Start Kits – consisting of a laptop and a computer – to its girl-led clubs in schools in Kenya and Tanzania exposing students and their teachers to the technology. Asante learned from its system-wide evaluation that these Digital Smart Start Kits were a major incentive for both teachers and students to participate in the program.<sup>14</sup> The clubs often had to be creative in how they used the Kits as some schools lacked power and internet access. Some of the Kits were solar powered, while some clubs conducted meetings at a community center. Some schools lacking electricity advocated to local governments for power so that they could use their Digital Smart Start Kits. The parents engaged on behalf of the schools and it worked. “*In Tanzania, after the government learned we were supplying the digital equipment, they agreed to bring electricity to four secondary schools in the program,*” said Ewald Tesha, Tanzania Program Manager.

### *5.2 Choose user-friendly terminology about digital skill-building programs to avoid intimidating youth with limited tech skills.*

In South Africa, where women make up only 23 percent of the workforce in technology sectors, Dream Factory set up the Job Readiness Academy for young people who have not finished secondary school or university to learn coding and other digital skills. They learned that when they initially included the word “coding” in the program name (The Emergent Business and Coding Academy), it intimidated potential students. In their first round of recruitment in South Africa, they only received 70 applicants. Some young women did not know what coding was, or assumed it was too advanced for them since they had limited or no computer skills at all. During the second round of recruitment in Botswana, they adapted and changed the name to Job Readiness Academy and received over 700 applicants.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Facilitating young women’s economic empowerment requires more girls completing secondary and higher education; girls enrolling in programs dominated by men such as those in science, technology, engineering and math (STEM); increasing financial literacy of girls and young women; cultural and systems changes that create an enabling environment that reduces sexual harassment and gender-based violence, and equal access to professional networks and financial services. Based on the lessons learned from the Prize grants, we recommend the following.

***Recommendation: Workforce development programs should include financial literacy training on the full range of available financial services. At the same time, youth development programs should encourage expansion of financial products appropriate for youth to meet youth needs. While financial inclusion continues to increase, youth are not finding financial services/products that meet their needs, even when they are accessible to them.***

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> The Digital Smart Start Kids were not funded by the Prize grant, but the impact of these kits was part of the evaluation funded by the grant.

The challenge of self-employment as a solution to girls' and women's economic empowerment is three-fold: 1) women may work 1.4 times more hours than men, 2) women are two to ten times more likely than men to do unpaid domestic work, and 3) women earn less than their male counterparts.<sup>15</sup> In addition, most young people are in microenterprises that typically yield less income than wage employment, yet may be their only livelihood option outside illegal (such as theft, selling drugs) and demoralizing choices (such as transactional sex, prostitution, joining violent extremist groups).<sup>16</sup> Most of the Prize grantees offered marketable skills training often paired with entrepreneurship training, so that youth participants expanded their skill sets for both wage employment and starting/running businesses. Youth continue to be held back by lack of financial capital. Even in Kenya where financial inclusion is high, youth report decreased financial health—manage day to day, cope with risk, or invest in the future—suggesting a continued absence of youth-tailored financial services.<sup>17</sup> In addition to savings and loan groups—a type of informal financial service—youth may have access to other informal, formal, public and embedded financial services. These may not all be known or understood by youth. KCEO's provision of start-up capital for young mothers with disabilities is a form of embedded finance in which a non-financial organization provides capital through a formal mechanism. Asante encouraged youth to establish personal or group-based savings, contributing to girls' ability to self-finance their businesses, as well as re-invest at higher rates than boys.

***Recommendation:*** Youth unemployment cannot be solved by youth workforce development programs alone. Youth workforce development programs should be designed as part of broader donor and government strategies that address the underlying factors that affect labor market demand and generate economic growth. Workforce development programs must avoid unreasonably raising youth and community expectations regarding their singular impact on youth employment.

Another barrier to wage employment is the lack of formal jobs, which may be exacerbated for youth by their age and inexperience. As Asante pointed out in their evaluation funded by the Prize grant, 36% of surveyed Kenyan program alumni who have been applying to jobs have not received an offer. This is about the average youth unemployment rate in Kenya, while the national unemployment rate is 10 percent.<sup>18</sup>

***Recommendation:*** Engage and support local organizations that have experience with adapting PYD to the needs of girls, young women, and other sub-sets of youth who are marginalized. They should address the effects of gender inequality and marginalization by supporting youth choice and agency using locally appropriate mechanisms and facilitating positive, growth mindsets.

Choice and decision-making ability are keys to young women's economic empowerment and directly relate to control over decisions regarding assets, income, and spending. Choice and personal agency are often impeded by gender inequality, gender-based violence, and other physical and psychological sources of harm, and cultural-related marginalization of girls and young women, such as those related to unwed

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<sup>15</sup> Flynn J, Mader P, Oosterom M, Ripoll S. Failing young people? Addressing the supply-side bias and individualisation in youth employment programming: Institute of Development Studies Evidence Report 216. Brighton: IDS; 2017. Accessed from: [https://www.youthpower.org/sites/default/files/YouthPower/resources/ER216\\_FailingYoungPeople\\_AddressingtheSupplySideBiasandIndividualisationinYouthEmploymentProgramming.pdf](https://www.youthpower.org/sites/default/files/YouthPower/resources/ER216_FailingYoungPeople_AddressingtheSupplySideBiasandIndividualisationinYouthEmploymentProgramming.pdf)

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ferrand, David. Financing Kenya: 2020 hindsight for Vision 2030. Kenya Financial Sector Deepening Programme. December 2019.

<sup>18</sup> Franz, Jutta, Omolo, Jacob. Youth Employment Initiatives in Kenya: Report of a Review Commissioned by the World Bank and Kenya Vision 2030. 2014.

teenage mothers and early marriage. Prize grantees mitigated the effects of marginalization by helping youth recognize, reflect and address them, work individually and in groups, and with mentors and role models. The grantees facilitated positive mindsets through mechanisms that rely on mutual trust between participants and program staff and organizations, which were started, mostly, by local youth. The result is locally driven program design and solutions based on a deep understanding of the challenges various youth sub-populations experience.

***Recommendation: Assess organizations' processes including monitoring and evaluation capacity and integrate local capacity strengthening that will outlast donor financial support and oversight.***

Prize grantees appreciated the opportunity this grant offered, often noting that they had to document and/or improve their organization's processes in order to qualify for the grant. Regarding monitoring and evaluation, however, most grantees were not able to comprehensively collect quality evaluation data on PYD indicators without significant additional support.

***Recommendation: Engaging local organizations with existing networks and knowledge can magnify program impact and increase scale through strategic, coordinated action with partners and networks. Programs that successfully act with public and private sectors, and cross-sectoral coalitions, see greater outreach and potential for scale.***

A positive enabling environment supports youth success, yet it is often lacking. Prize grantees illustrate how partnerships with public institutions; cross-sectoral community coalitions; combining in-person training with online courses; webinars and social media; and integrating gender issues into training curricula can resonate throughout communities creating systems change. Some grantees expanded their outreach, while others changed mindsets beyond those of youth participants, facilitating understanding between youth and business leaders, for example, opening the way for youth employment where mistrust was common.

***Recommendation: Incentivize local organizations to document and share their experience and knowledge for use by other organizations in order to strengthen the performance of their peer organizations and the broader youth development sector.***

Prize grantees established that they are capable organizations with deep knowledge of their communities and the challenges facing the youth they serve. They successfully implemented interventions for and with marginalized youth. They illustrate how youth-led, locally driven solutions are not only viable, but necessary. Asante found that school-based clubs required leadership quotas for girls, so that girls could grow in those roles, opening their eyes to their potential as leaders, rather than silencing their own voices when boys were leaders. Finally, two of the grantees, KCEO and Safeplan Uganda, created books that can be used across contexts, informing the development community about ways to change the enabling environment in favor of youth development.

***Recommendation: Be creative, flexible, and deliberate in designing interventions to address the digital gender gap in education and workforce development programming. Monitor for unexpected challenges that come with introducing technologies and technology training programs to a community. Be prepared to adapt the application to different contexts as necessary.***

The gender gap in the ownership, access to, and use of digital technologies illustrates another way in which girls and young women are marginalized, suffering more than their male peers in a constraining environment. The gap is present in both urban and rural contexts. Yet Prize grantees such as Asante and

Dream Factory Foundation implemented activities in ways that narrowed this gap, giving girls and young women access to and skills in using technology.

## CONCLUSION

Offering opportunities for youth and particularly young women to improve their economic wellbeing is critical to their future and that of their communities and countries, as in many countries, youth are the majority of the population. Beyond that, we must break the cycle of intergenerational poverty that continuously burdens people from one generation to the next. Greater household economic wellbeing addresses a key predictor of children's wellbeing and therefore society's health.<sup>19</sup> Empowering girls and young women is crucial to breaking the cycle, because increasing the income and agency of women, as compared to men, often leads to better outcomes for households and children, as women invest more in their families, and children in particular.<sup>20</sup> When women control household income, they spend more on food and education, directly benefiting their children.<sup>21</sup>

The Prize experience illustrates how supporting local organizations whose missions include girls' and young women's economic empowerment has the potential to amplify local solutions to achieve systemic change. In order to scale up these local solutions, youth-led organizations require capacity strengthening, opportunities to share their expertise and local knowledge, and a greater role in development programming.

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<sup>19</sup> Sinclair, M. R., J. Carmichael, O. Diener, and D. Rutherford. 2013. "Why Measuring Child-Level Impacts Can Help Achieve Lasting Economic Change." Accessed July 1, 2016. [www.seepnetwork.org/why-measuring-child-level-impacts-canhelp-achieve-lasting-economic-change-resources-1216.php](http://www.seepnetwork.org/why-measuring-child-level-impacts-canhelp-achieve-lasting-economic-change-resources-1216.php).

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> World Bank, 2011, World Development Report 2012: Gender Equality and Development (Washington).